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Premise

- A complete story idea.
- The story premise is the marrow of your manuscript.
- When properly written, the story premise communicates the entire story in one or two neat sentences which include all the essential components of who, what, and watch-out!
- Without a story foundation an author can begin with a brilliant idea and then write into a dark corner or head two-thousand miles down a one-way street.
- The map and the functioning compass don't have to be on paper, but you ought to have them with you.

Premise is what your story is about. The premise line is your story told as a single sentence that reveals the main character and the adventure, delivers the basic story structure, and clarifies the idea within 100 words. A well-formed premise will give you that "Ah ha!" when you read it.

Premise has structure. It's more than just a beginning, middle, and end. It's essentially a universal "when..." statement within about 100 words, give or take.

According to the book *Anatomy of a Premise Line*, Jeff Lyons, there are four benefits from developing a powerful story premise:

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| 1.) A Premise will tell you if you have a story or a situation. |
| 2.) You can use a premise as an early warning system to realize story creep and avoid months of lost writing time. |
| 3.) A premise guides your entire writing process. |
| 4.) A premise gives you an effective, professional pitch tool to use with publishers, agents and editors. |

Structure

Character, crisis, chaos, Eureka! We have character change.

“Organization is what you do before you do it, so when you do it, it’s not all messed up.”

Winnie the Pooh

7 Components of Story Structure:

1.) **Character:** Your main character; the protagonist

2.) **Deficiency:** The main character is deficient—something is lacking or missing. This deficiency inspires your character to act. Get a sense of what your protagonist’s deficiency is and how it motivates action.

3.) **Quest:** The protagonist must want or desire something; love, power.

4.) **Pressure:** Conflict; you must keep your character from getting what s/he wants!

5.) **Stronger Pressure:** Pressure can be external and/or internal. It constantly increases and always opposes the character’s quest, and this pressure creates dramatic response.

Can there be too much pressure in a manuscript? No. Let me be clear about that. NO.

6.) **Final conflict:** Each pressure has increased in tension, and this is the final point where your character can’t take it anymore.

Donald Maass, literary agent

7.) **Resolution:** Your character must be changed (for better or worse) as a result of the pressure and response. This is where character overcomes the deficiency, or becomes its victim.

EXERCISE #1—identify all the 7 structural components within your story.

- 1.) Character
- 2.) Deficiency
- 3.) Quest
- 4.) Pressure
- 5.) Stronger Pressure
- 6.) Response
- 7.) Final conflict
- 8.) Resolution

Now form a basic premise statement.

*Take your first two components (1) Character and (2) Deficiency from your structure components and combine them into a “when” statement. When _____ happens, then it projects the main character into action. You might also call this the inciting incident.

*Take your third component (3) Quest and form a Quest statement. What does your character want?

*Build up the pressure until your character can’t take it any longer. Take (4) Pressure, (5) stronger pressure and (6) response from Structure to give a clear picture about the adventure and the opposing forces that keep the character from his quest.

*At last ... there is a resolution, a change for the character brought on by pressure. Use components (7) Final Conflict and (8) Resolution. There is a finality which will transform the character for better or worse. Circle back to your deficiency and ask, has my character overcome, or fallen victim to her/his deficiency?

EXERCISE #2—Final Premise Line

Take your premise statements and form them into one (or two) long sentence(s) creating your final premise line.

Try to keep it under 100 words.

Read your final premise line out loud. Is it clunky, or does it sound like a great elevator pitch?

If it's something you can pitch to a potential agent from the time it takes to ride an elevator from one floor to another, then you've got a premise line!

Items to consider when defining your story structure:

1.) Do you have a complete story?
2.) Are you using all the structure components?
3.) Is there a sense of beginning, middle and end?
4.) Is it visual? Is it unique? Can a reader grasp an overall theme?

